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The Prince and the Orchid: On the Death of John Hope Franklin, (1915 – 2009)
March 25, 2009

A Friend of Children's Studies

John Hope Franklin has died. We learned on Tuesday that he was deeply ill, and the telephone message of his death came Wednesday afternoon: "John Hope died this morning. May he rest in peace, and may we give thanks for having known him."

The same colleague and friend wrote me again Thursday morning, and expressed again what I was also thinking.

"I feel that a part of my life ended with John Hope, who was not only connected in so many ways to all of us, but to the history of our times. 'One lives by hope,' he said. 'I do. It's not merely my middle name, it's my life. I live by hope.' I am thankful that he lived to see the election of 2008."

John Hope Franklin, the James B. Duke Professor Emeritus of History and Professor of Legal History in the Law School at Duke University, had many lasting connections to Brooklyn College and The City University of New York. These reach back to 1956 when he was appointed full professor and chair of the History Department at Brooklyn College. *The New York Times* on February 15, 1956 ran a front page article with a full photograph and headline: "Negro Educator Chosen to Head Department at Brooklyn College. Howard University Professor Will be First of Race to Hold that Rank Here." The first paragraph announced the historic event that "For the first time, a municipal college is to have a Negro educator as chairman of an academic department." It continued: "As far as can be determined, no other college in the city – or in the state for that matter – has ever appointed a Negro chairman." It went on to enumerate some of John Hope Franklin's many accomplishments and publications. "Dr. Franklin, at 41, has made a name for himself in the field of history. He has won various awards and citations, among them the President's Fellowship Award of Brown University and the Phi Beta Kappa key at Fisk University. He received his doctorate from Harvard University."

Although he subsequently moved on to the University of Chicago and still later in life to Duke University, Professor Franklin kept up his connections with Brooklyn College. In 1981, he was the Commencement speaker at Brooklyn College. In 1990, he delivered the Second Charles R. Lawrence II Memorial Lecture of Brooklyn College and the Department of Sociology: "Whither American Brotherhood?" And in April 2006, Professor Franklin gave the keynote address at the first conference of the Black Male Initiative of The City University of New York. It was a particular honor for me to have been involved on both occasions. Perhaps I also ought to mention that from the very outset in 1991 when Brooklyn College became the founding institution of the interdisciplinary field of Children's Studies, John Hope Franklin was enthusiastically supportive and said: "Why had nobody before thought of establishing this field?"

Together with so many others, I was fortunate and privileged to have known him.

As is widely known, Professor Franklin was a distinguished scholar as well as a fierce activist and fighter for freedom and equality to his very last days. His extraordinary accomplishments and numerous honors are documented in the obituaries

and notices of his life and death being published now. He also narrated many episodes of his life's journey in his *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin*, published in 2006.

What I would like to add here are a few details from the personal encounters and subsequent friendship that began in 1980 - 1981, when he and I were Fellows at the National Humanities Center in the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina. John Hope's study was two doors away from mine. I would see him most every day. Together with other fellows, we would have lunch or meet on many other occasions. Every morning he would arrive with a different beautiful orchid in his lapel, and one of his blooming orchid plants was always on loan in the entrance vestibule to the National Humanities Center. At that time his wife, Aurelia Franklin, was still alive, and we would meet for dinner or cocktails at each others homes. His greenhouse with all his orchids was a place of special beauty. He told me how he rented a U-Haul after his retirement from the University of Chicago and drove all his orchid plants to Durham, North Carolina.

Our friendship never ended. I would often find myself at conferences where he was the keynote speaker. At intervals, I would travel to see him in North Carolina. One of the last such occasions was when he read a chapter from the manuscript of his autobiography at a Board of Trustees dinner of the National Humanities Center. One of his most extraordinary personal characteristics was the combination in him of genuine charm, warm humanity, deep friendship and an openly fierce and unbending determination to fight for the rights and freedoms of the disadvantaged. In all the time I have had the privilege to know him, I am certain that he never mellowed or made, what he would have considered compromises of principles with whatever powers that be. His purposeful and steely resoluteness in open opposition to racial inequities in our society was unremitting. I know that he campaigned for Barrack Obama despite the circumstance that he was hospitalized several times in 2008. He was able to live to see Barrack Obama become the first African American President of the United States.

I always called him on his birthday, January 2nd – the last time this year. It was then that he told me that he was suffering from severe congestive heart failure. I understood what he was telling me, and I so hoped that we would still be able to see each other on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the National Humanities Center on April 16th and 17th. It was 30 years ago also that he gave the major address at the dedication ceremonies of the National Humanities Center, which was when we first met.

John Hope was an extraordinary and unique human being. A supporter of our Children's Studies program and mission. A friend to me and my family. A human being so many of his colleagues and friends loved and cared about deeply. I always called John Hope "the Prince." He would laugh and then say that he preferred "prince" to "king" because this meant that he was young and had a life full of possibilities ahead of him.

And indeed, with his death a part of my life ended as well.

March 26, 2009



John Hope Franklin and Gertrud Lenzer
National Humanities Center, April 2005

Gertrud Lenzer
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